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*Holding Proteus: William Godwin in his letters**Pamela Clemit*

The 1980s and 1990s saw a transformation in the reading of prose literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This transformation was pioneered by enterprising academic editors, working closely with the forward-thinking London publishing house Pickering and Chatto, and began with the publication of a series of multi-volume scholarly editions of prose writers eminent in their own day, but largely unavailable to modern readers. For students of literature and history, a key event was the publication in 1989 of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, which brought together Wollstonecraft's entire oeuvre for the first time.¹ This edition was closely followed by *The Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, *The Works of Maria Edgeworth*, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, and many others.² Further landmark editions are in progress – notably *The Works of Charlotte Smith*.³ Large-scale editions such as these, each 'dedicated to an archaeological task of recovery',⁴ have provided the foundations for much of the rehistoricizing of authors, texts, and contexts that has distinguished recent critical and interpretative study of the Romantic era.

Marilyn Butler was in at the start of this new phase in Romantic editing, and its present expansiveness owes much to her timely recognition of the need for annotated, high-quality editions as a prerequisite to any critical repossession of the literary past. As co-editor of the works of Wollstonecraft, co-author of the critical introduction to Godwin's collected novels, and, especially, general editor of Edgeworth's works, she has played a major role in changing our preconceptions about Romantic prose in all its forms. Significantly, Butler's editorial achievements have not been confined to major scholarly editions: she has edited a number of paperback editions for classroom use – one of which, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, has opened up an entire field to further editorial and critical exploration.⁵ This wealth of editorial experience has given Butler a keen

sense of the advantages special to the genre. As she wrote in 1995: 'We must have true scholarly editions . . . not only to grasp the internal dynamics of an individual career, but to understand its group dynamics, its inter-relations with society and history.'⁶ Scholarly editions are important, Butler argues, not just because they establish definitive or near-definitive texts, but because of their capacity to open up the text's range of external reference: through apparatus such as explanatory notes, introductions, and collations, they provide the biographical, literary, historical, and inter-textual information necessary for a properly contextualized reading. A scholarly edition alone, in Butler's view, can perform all these functions.

Nowhere is the transformative potential of editorial repossession more evident than in the case of the radical philosopher, novelist, and social thinker William Godwin. Only a few of his works, until recently, were available to modern critical scrutiny. The publication in 1992 of the Pickering Masters edition of his novels, together with his major political, philosophical, and educational works, helped to re-establish Godwin as a central presence in the literary and historical culture of the Romantic era. In collecting for the first time all six of his full-length novels, this edition highlighted Godwin's innovative use of the novel 'to write an alternative form of history, a history of mentalities' and offered special insights into a key Romantic literary grouping, which included his first wife Mary Wollstonecraft, his daughter Mary Shelley, and his son-in-law Percy Bysshe Shelley.⁷ However, the inclusion in volume 1 of a few items from Godwin's massive archive of correspondence – five letters of moral and intellectual advice to Shelley, written in 1812 – made the absence of any scholarly edition of his letters even more striking.⁸

Some 1,200 of Godwin's outgoing letters survive, but only a small number has been published. A selection (with unreliable texts) appeared in C. Kegan Paul's *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries* (1876), a 'life and letters' study commissioned by Godwin's grandson, Sir Percy Florence Shelley, and his wife Jane, Lady Shelley, as part of their efforts to safeguard the reputations of their controversial forebears. The twelve-month correspondence between Godwin and Wollstonecraft was published in *Godwin & Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft* (1967), edited by Ralph M. Wardle. A selection of Godwin's other letters may be found in *Shelley and His Circle*.⁹ As Stuart Curran observed in a review of Godwin's *Collected Novels*, these disparate publications suggest what might be constituted if Godwin's letters were available in their entirety: 'an intellectual record of the age commensurate with that of Coleridge's letters, which have been long accessible in six fat volumes'.¹⁰

A full edition of Godwin's letters is now under way.¹¹ No other scholarly genre can take us so intimately into a writer's personal and creative life, or his historical and cultural milieu. This genre is especially suited to a literary figure of such versatility and range as Godwin. Although Godwin is often treated as if he were a contemporary of Wordsworth and Coleridge, he was almost the same age as Blake, and he outlived all the major Romantic writers, apart from Wordsworth. His letters, as a record of his maturity as well as of his origins and formation, have a special richness. They document a larger shift in cultural sensibility, from the uncompromising rationalism of the French revolutionary era to a Romantic emphasis on sympathy and feeling, as reflected through the changing consciousness of one individual. Kelvin Everest, in his annotations to the Longman edition of Shelley's poems, discerned a fleeting, playful identification between Godwin and 'Proteus old' in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).¹² Proteus was the ancient, prophetic sea-god who eluded questioners by assuming many different shapes. If he were held fast, throughout his struggles, eventually he would resume his original state and yield his wisdom. Holding Proteus, through all his changing forms, seems a fitting image for the project of editing the letters of Godwin, that consummate Romantic shape-shifter, who regarded the change of opinion as a moral duty, in cases of further enlightenment, and who prided himself, above all, on his intellectual mobility.

'Do you not feel how very inadequately epistolary communication supplies the place of oral discussion?', wrote Godwin at the end of a brief letter to his new friend Thomas Wedgwood, dated 7 November 1795.¹³ Such a question reflects Godwin's early belief in colloquial discussion – what he called in *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793) 'the collision of mind with mind' – as the best means by which social and moral improvement could be achieved.¹⁴ This belief in the reformist power of social interchange was a central feature of the culture of English Rational Dissent in which Godwin was educated. In Richard Price's words, 'It is only . . . by diligent enquiry, by free discussion and the collision of different sentiments, that knowledge can be increased, truth struck out, and the dignity of our species promoted.'¹⁵ The Rational Dissenters did not hold to a unified doctrinal position, but they shared the ideal of a free public sphere, in which all were able to think, debate, and publish without State interference.¹⁶ Although Rational Dissent went into decline by the end of the 1790s, as many of its leaders retired, died, or went into exile, Godwin maintained a lifelong commitment to the ideal of like-minded citizens assisting each other in the pursuit of truth.

Despite his throwaway remark to Wedgwood, Godwin prized epistolary communication at least as highly as oral exchange. His education in the traditions of Rational Dissent had given him a keen understanding of the link between written records and a sense of communal identity, together with a lifelong habit of personal account-keeping. So important was epistolary communication to Godwin that by the end of November 1795 he had begun to make use of a portable letter-copying machine, a gift from Wedgwood, inaugurating a lifelong habit of keeping duplicates, either mechanical or scribal, of his outgoing letters.¹⁷ By 1798, Godwin had further modified his view of the 'inadequacies' of letter-writing. In a letter to an unknown correspondent, dated 10 January, he admitted that epistolary communication afforded scope for both philosophical discussion and exploration of feeling: 'I am pleased with the style of writing we have lately employed. I have more taste . . . for letters & conversations of feeling, than of discussion.'¹⁸ By 1805, fresh from the completion of his third full-length novel, *Fleetwood; or, The New Man of Feeling*, Godwin's views had undergone a further shift. He positively welcomed the opportunity to write what he called, in a letter to his second wife Mary Jane Godwin, dated 2 April, 'a little journal of my impressions & sensations'.¹⁹ As the author of books in the epistolary mode, Godwin knew that letters could never be transparent windows into the soul – however much he might wish them to be – but were always, to a greater or lesser extent, compositions, designed for the particular audience that the writer has in mind. In documenting the processes of thinking and feeling, letters offered him scope for a special kind of self-presentation. As a record of his shaping of his 'impressions & sensations' over three generations, Godwin's letters tell a story unmatched by any of his other autobiographical documents.

Godwin's extant letters begin in 1782 with a draft to an unknown correspondent concerning a church dispute, which led to his expulsion from the post of Dissenting minister at Stowmarket in April of that year.²⁰ The latest letter so far identified, to John Hobart Caunter, is dated 18 March 1836, less than three weeks before Godwin's death, and concerns the publication of Mary Shelley's last novel, *Falkner* (1837).²¹ In between, the letters record the nuances of Godwin's intellectual, emotional, and psychological development from his origins in provincial Dissent, through a decade of metropolitan fame and notoriety as a radical philosopher, to his later years as a prolific author, businessman, and father of an extraordinary literary family. In a limited space it is possible only to suggest the multiple perspectives on Godwin's life, works, and times afforded by the letters. The 'private talk'²² of this protean intellectual not only adds to our knowledge

of his individual career, but also increases our understanding of British social and cultural networks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

To begin with, Godwin's letters add a new dimension to his intellectual history. They document his efforts to live a life based on his advanced principles, charting his responses, more or less considered, to situations in which his key philosophical commitments – to unfettered enquiry, to disinterested benevolence, to unreserved social communication – were put to the test. In displaying the processes of thinking, as represented to different recipients, they reveal the contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities which became the substance of his creative writings. For example, following his marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft on 29 March 1797, Godwin's recognition that he had acted in opposition to his philosophical doctrines led him to justify his conduct in letters to friends. He wrote to Thomas Wedgwood on 19 April:

Some persons have found an inconsistency between my practice in this instance & my doctrines. But I cannot see it. The do[ctrine] in my Political Justice is, that an attachment in some [degree per]manent, between two persons of opposite sexes is right, but that marriage, as practised in European countries, is wrong. I still adhere to that opinion. Nothing but a regard for the happiness of the individual, which I had no right to injure, could have induced me to submit to an institution, which I wish to see abolished, & which I would recommend to my fellow men never to practise, but with the greatest caution. Having done what I thought necessary for the peace & respectability of the individual, I hold myself no otherwise bound than I was before the ceremony took place.²³

Here Godwin rehearses for Wedgwood's benefit the process by which the dictates of pure theory had been modified in the crucible of experience. Godwin's principled opposition to marriage gives way to what he perceives as the superior claim of his duty to promote the peace and respectability of an individual, that is, his love for Wollstonecraft – even if he has not yet found a vocabulary in which to express it. This super-subtle reasoning adumbrates a characteristic feature of Godwin's thought, showing that the distinction between theory and practice drawn in his philosophical writings extended to private as well as publicly political matters.

Yet Godwin's response to intractable daily experience was not always so measured. For example, his zealous pursuit of frankness and sincerity, as a means of moral enlightenment, appears fraught with contradictions. Godwin's commitment to unreserved communication is especially evident in letters to the many talented younger men to whom he became a substitute father and intellectual guide, and with whom he sought to create a rational

community based on the ideal of collective moral supervision advocated in *Political Justice*.²⁴ In the early 1790s, this group included Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, his second cousin and a future star of the American stage, who lived in Godwin's household from the ages of twelve to sixteen, and George Dyson, one of Godwin's 'prime favourites',²⁵ a translator and amateur painter, who was a few years older than Cooper. When in March 1792 these two young men quarrelled, and Dyson struck Cooper, Godwin seized the opportunity to advance moral progress by writing a letter of reproof to Dyson:

You say, you struck him from a feeling uncorrected by philosophy, & supported by an opinion that such modes of reproof were necessary for minds like his . . . & what good did you intend to his mind by striking him? . . . A blessed government will this be of philosophers who are to deal their blows whenever it shall please their high mightinesses to be in a passion. You have already perhaps done an irreparable injury to T's mind, who like all young people is very apt to judge of philosophy or any set of principles by the conduct of those who profess them. Ought we to beat our fellow mortals for our own sakes or for theirs? If for theirs, we ought at least maturely to deliberate in each instance whether beating be precisely the best mode of reforming their characters & meliorating their minds. The doctrine of beating is a very comfortable one, because it indulges all our indolent propensities . . . Not to add that as in your case it teaches us to indulge our passions, & persuades us that there is no reason for us to be very anxious to subdue the brutality of our nature.²⁶

This letter shows the dilemmas which arose when Godwin's role as self-appointed arbiter of one young man's moral conduct was complicated by the presence of another. As well as demonstrating the high admonitory tone he often adopted in pursuit of the philosophical ideal of sincerity, it reveals his unphilosophical anger towards Dyson and his fierce protectiveness of Cooper. In addition, the sole surviving text of the letter is preserved in a draft in Cooper's hand, with Godwin's autograph corrections, suggesting that it was probably dictated to the person who forms its subject. This indicates that Godwin wished Cooper as well as Dyson to be instructed – and perhaps reassured – by his intervention. That Godwin was on occasions prepared to manipulate the doctrine of sincerity to serve his own ends is confirmed by a postscript: 'M' Holcroft has read what I have written[;] perhaps it would be of use to you to converse with him while the impression is fresh on his mind.' This statement is entirely consistent with Godwin's belief in collective moral supervision, but it also makes it hard for Dyson to do anything but admit he was in the wrong. In the dust and heat of lived experience, the exercise of frankness appears anything but disinterested.

As well as helping us to grasp the dynamics of Godwin's volatile household, the letters transform our understanding of his character as a family man. Ever since conservative reviewers caricatured the author of *Political Justice* as an embodiment of abstract reason, Godwin has been depicted as intellectually detached and stoically unemotional. As a result, we have little sense of his interiority: he is nearly always portrayed from the outside, whether being satirized by conservatives (Elizabeth Hamilton's 'Mr Vapour'), ridiculed by former admirers ('oh, most abominable nose!'), or dismissed by casual visitors ('Godwin's great head full of cold brains').²⁷ Yet many of Godwin's letters to friends and family reveal a man who, to reverse Wordsworth's formulation, not only thought long and deeply but also had powerful feelings. For example, when Wollstonecraft died on 10 September 1797, ten days after the birth of their daughter Mary, Godwin was too upset to attend the funeral. Instead he took refuge at the house of his old friend James Marshal, where he wrote a letter to Anthony Carlisle, the doctor who had nursed her to the end:

I am here sitting alone in M^r Marshal's lodgings during my wife's funeral. My mind is extremely sunk & languid. But I husband my thoughts, & shall do very well. I have been but once since you saw me, in a train of thought that gave me alarm. One of my wife's books now lies near me, but I avoid opening it. I took up a book on the education of children, but that impressed me too forcibly with my forlorn & disabled state with respect to the two poor animals left under my protection, & I threw it aside.

Nothing could be more soothing to my mind than to dwell in a long letter upon her virtues & accomplishments, & our mutual happiness past & in prospect. But the attractions of this subject are delusive, & I dare not trust myself with it.

... I may say to you on paper what I observed to you in our last interview, that I never, in the whole course of my life, met with the union of so clear & capacious an understanding, with so much goodness of heart & sweetness of manners.²⁸

Letters such as this reveal a voice that has rarely been heard in British Romanticism: Godwin's vulnerable interior voice, registering the moment when his theories had come smack against the rock of experience; grappling with powerful emotions of love and loss; composing an image of Wollstonecraft in order to compose himself. Nine days later, he began work on *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798).

To his young friend Amelia Alderson (later Opie), Godwin candidly represented his worries about Wollstonecraft's two children: 'They have no mother, & I am afraid I am scarcely worth having as a father. I feel as if I were the most unfit person in the world for the business of education. She was the best qualified of any person I ever saw.'²⁹ Yet, judging by his letters,

Godwin was unnecessarily pessimistic in his low estimate of his ability to bring up Fanny Imlay, then aged three, and his new-born daughter Mary. When he visited Ireland in July and August 1800, he wrote regular letters home to Marshal, in whose care he left the children, anxiously requesting news about their daily activities: 'Every minute particular that you will be so good as to write to me respecting them, will be highly gratifying.'³⁰ Moreover, the letters included long passages written expressly for Fanny and Mary. For example, he wrote on 2–3 August:

Ah, poor Fanny, here is another letter from papa & what do you think he says about the little girls in it. Let me see! Would pretty little Mary . . . be offended if I did not put in her name? Look at the map! This is Sunday, that I am now writing. Before next Sunday I shall have crossed that place there that you see marked as sea, between Ireland & England, & shall hope indeed to be half way home. That is not a very long while now, is it? Perhaps I shall be upon the sea in a ship, the very moment Marshal is reading the letter to you. There is about going in a ship in mrs Barbauld's book. But I shall write another letter that will come two or three days after this, & then I shall be in England. And in a day or two after that I shall hope to see Fanny & Marshal & Mary sitting on the trunks of the trees.³¹

This passage not only reveals Godwin's tenderness towards the children, but also shows him thinking his way into their situation and answering their unstated concerns. To engage their interest, he adopts an accessible style, using simple concepts, vocabulary, and sentence structures – an idiom that was to be developed further in his experimental children's books.³² As well as seeking to foster their 'appropriate portion of independence',³³ he reassures them of his love and thoughts, distracting them from his absence by focusing on his return – down to the concrete particulars of the view he would like to see from the coach-window as it arrived at Camden Town.

Godwin was not only an attentive father, but also a loving son – and husband. When his mother died, following a long illness, on 13 August 1809, he wrote a long letter to his second wife Mary Jane Godwin describing his feelings when he returned home alone after the funeral:

That night I slept in the chamber you used, & where my mother's corpse reposed the night before . . . I have had strange feelings arising from the present occasion. I was brought up in great tenderness, & though my mind was pr[one] to independence, I was never led to much independence of feeling. While my mother lived, I always felt to a certain degree as if I had somebody who was my superior, & who exercised a mysterious protection over me. I belonged to something; I hung to something; there is nothing that has so much reverence & religion in it as affection to parents. The knot is now severed, & I am for the first time, at more than fifty years of age, alone.³⁴

This passage reads as a Godwinian 'spot of time', recalling the moments of moral and imaginative growth in *The Prelude* (1805). The mundane details of the funeral drop away as Godwin, alone at night, recollects in tranquillity his childhood feelings of security; this process of meditative reflection leads to a heightened perception of the world of psychological and moral certainties he has lost. Moreover, that he expressed himself so openly to Mary Jane Godwin, often caricatured by those who disliked her, suggests that his second marriage was much more of a fulfilling partnership than is often thought. Such letters not only challenge the received biographical image of Godwin, shedding light on the different stages of his eventful domestic life, but also bear witness to significant changes in his ethical views. As he noted privately in July 1801: 'My writings hitherto . . . have exhibited a view of half only of the human mind, there remain the feelings, & the imagination considered as the instrument of feeling.'³⁵ This formulation was characteristically belated: Godwin's letters record his development of a 'new language' of feeling from 1796 onwards, when he and Wollstonecraft began to 'woo philosophy' together.³⁶ After losing her, he worked to re-establish an equally loving domestic bond, based on intellectual and sexual equality, with Mary Jane Godwin.

Godwin's letters also reveal his lasting importance as a cultural commentator, refuting the traditional view that he was a man in retreat, both politically and intellectually, from around 1800. On the contrary, he continued to engage with contemporary politics, both at home and abroad, to assist younger authors seeking to establish themselves in the literary marketplace, and to pursue his own project of moral and political enlightenment through writing and discussion. Above all, Godwin's commitment to gradual political reform did not diminish in his later years. He welcomed the 1820 Spanish Revolution, with a characteristic mixture of approval and caution.³⁷ He applauded the 'generous magnanimity and forbearance' displayed by the leaders of the 1830 July Revolution in France.³⁸ At home, when the Reform Bill was rejected by the House of Lords in October 1831, Godwin (then aged seventy-five) wrote to Earl Grey, the Whig prime minister, offering to draft a formal protest to the king on behalf of the House of Commons.³⁹ To the end he remained, as he declared to Lady Caroline Lamb in 1819, 'in principle a republican, but in practice a Whig'.⁴⁰

Moreover, Godwin continued to take an active interest in the contemporary literary scene – even if he did not like all that he saw. The poetry of Walter Scott, he wrote to his son William, then away at school, is 'very pretty . . . as good as a second rate novel'. Byron, on the other hand, 'is in the true sense of the word a poet': 'His energy is real energy; his language

is truly felicitous . . . All that I have to object against him, is the narrow range of his talent.'⁴¹ Shelley's poetry, as might be expected, provoked an even more divided response. Godwin wrote to Mary Shelley on 30 March 1820: 'I have read the tragedy of Cenci, & am glad to see Shelley at last descending to what really passes among human creatures. The story is certainly an unfortunate one; but the execution gives me a new idea of Shelley's powers.'⁴² By the early nineteenth century, however, Godwin's real literary preferences lay in the Renaissance era, as he admitted to Shelley: 'These were the times when Authors thought: every line is pregnant with sense & the reader is inevitably put to the expense of thinking likewise.'⁴³ Above all, Godwin revered Milton, whose testimony to his sense of personal calling in book II of *The Reason of Church Government* he appropriated to describe his own. "I have long taken it", he wrote to an unknown correspondent on 3 August 1811, 'as Milton says, "by an inward prompting which daily grew upon me, to be my portion in this life", to be a communicator of truth.'⁴⁴

This paraphrase of Milton's celebrated vocational reflections is by no means the only indication of Godwin's fundamental belief in the civic responsibilities of authorship. In one of his earliest surviving letters, to his mother, he explains his abandonment of the Dissenting ministry in favour of secular authorship: 'I know of nothing worth living for but usefulness & the service of my fellow creatures . . . And as I derive every thing from God, I hope the situation in which I am now placed is that in which I am most likely to be useful.'⁴⁵ Godwin's emphasis on moral responsibility owes much to the Calvinist belief that each individual is a steward of talents placed in his or her possession by God, and will eventually be called to account for how such gifts have been used.⁴⁶ His letters reveal the dilemmas of conscience which arose, from time to time, when this belief in individual moral responsibility came into conflict with the practical demands of earning a living. Even so, he continued to represent himself as a writer dedicated to public welfare. Writing on 15 April 1830 to Mary Shelley, he instructed her how to describe to the publisher John Murray his latest work, *Thoughts on Man* (1831), then in progress. Tell Murray, he wrote, 'Whether it is published during my life, or after my death, it is a light that cannot be extinguished – "the precious life-blood of a discerning spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life".'⁴⁷ This invocation of Milton's view of books as active agents of reform is more than an impressive sales pitch: it bears witness to Godwin's lifelong quest for a secular justification of his career as an author.

Godwin's letters also provide a wealth of practical information about his career as a professional author. Over the six decades of his writing life,

he corresponded with most of the leading publishers of the day – including William Blackwood, Henry Colburn, Archibald Constable, Richard Phillips, and George Robinson, as well as Murray. These letters shed light on his methods of researching and composing his published works, and enable us to track the development of works in progress – as in, for example, the growth of *History of the Commonwealth of England* (1824–8) from two volumes to four.⁴⁸ As well as adding to our knowledge of his completed works, they provide unique evidence of unexecuted literary plans. For example, on 29 March 1793, whilst writing volume 1 of *Caleb Williams* (1794), he wrote to Robinson formally proposing in three quarto volumes ‘a Roman History from the building of the city by Romulus to the battle of Actium’.⁴⁹ Although this plan came to nothing, it shows how easily his career might have taken a different path. In later life, he sketched plans for a series of large-scale projects concerning the classification and organization of knowledge, including a literary history of England, a history of the Protestant Reformation, and a multi-volume ‘Lives of the English Poets’. Again, these projects never materialized – unless we consider *Life of Chaucer* (1803) as the first instalment of ‘Lives of the English Poets’ – but they underscore Godwin’s ambitions as a purveyor of knowledge and a bringer of enlightenment.

Yet Godwin was not just an English *philosophe*, seeking to change the world through the intellectual medium of books: he was also a practical man with a keen eye for what would sell. His letters to publishers deal with not only contracts and deadlines, but also proofs, titles, and advance publicity, showing how closely he was involved in all aspects of book production. For example, a letter of 2 January 1798 to Joseph Johnson reveals Godwin responding to, and sometimes resisting, changes which the publisher suggested to the proof of *Memoirs*: ‘The only reason why I do not approve your pencil alterations in page 9’, wrote Godwin, ‘is because I think they bear harder upon Mary’s father than the passage as it stands. Severities, if it does [not] mean blows, means whipping, & this would be the obvious meaning, taken with the context. You therefore seem to make him threaten his wife with a whipping.’⁵⁰ Such a degree of interaction between author and publisher might seem exceptional – especially in view of Johnson’s close friendship with Wollstonecraft – but letters to Phillips, Colburn, and others convey a similar attentiveness to detail. Moreover, for twenty years of his life Godwin was himself a publisher and bookseller. His letters concerning the Juvenile Library, which he owned and managed with Mary Jane Godwin from 1805 to 1825, provide a comprehensive record of his business dealings: from the commissioning of authors and illustrators, through the various

stages of sponsorship, financing, publication, and distribution. These letters form a compendium of knowledge about publishing practices in the early nineteenth century, mapping the overlapping economies of literary patronage and the marketplace, and revealing the dilemmas of an author who frequently got caught between the two.

Godwin's letters do not merely tell the story of his own development, but also shed light on the workings of the intricate literary and social communities he inhabited. As a record of his epistolary 'collisions of mind' with many literary, political, dramatic, and artistic figures of note, his letters enrich our understanding of the major radical networks of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Above all, the letters uncover Godwin's role in promoting the work of women writers. One of his most creative epistolary dialogues was with his daughter, Mary Shelley, to whom he offered practical help and constructive criticism when she sought to establish herself as a professional writer after Shelley's death in 1822.⁵¹ This practice of actively supporting women writers began in the decade following the French Revolution, when Godwin, then at the height of his fame amongst educated radicals, acted as literary adviser to several women intellectuals sympathetic to the cause of reform, who sought to further their public ambitions by forming alliances with helpful men. In addition to Wollstonecraft, these figures included Amelia Alderson, Mary Hays, and Mary Robinson. A study of this entire network of literary and social relations would be the subject of another essay. The richest example is Godwin's epistolary dialogue with Elizabeth Inchbald, with whom he corresponded, at intervals, for more than twenty-five years.⁵²

Unlike most of Godwin's women acquaintances, Inchbald did not share his Dissenting background, but, as a Roman Catholic, she shared his experience of belonging to a marginalized social and religious community.⁵³ When the pair met on 29 October 1792, she, three years his senior, had retired from her first career as an actress and was already a successful dramatist and novelist; he, after a decade of anonymous publications in an extraordinary diversity of genres, was writing the final books of *Political Justice*. Although it has been suggested that Godwin proposed marriage to Inchbald, there is little evidence to support this idea.⁵⁴ The surviving data suggests that their mutual personal regard found its main expression in their frank admiration of each other's literary abilities, and in their equally unreserved criticisms of each other's perceived faults.

Godwin's letters reveal that he acted as a valued source of professional advice to Inchbald in the early 1790s. Mindful of the growing climate of government repression, which followed the Proclamation against Seditious

Writings and Publications of 21 May 1792, he advised her against publication on politically inflammatory subjects. On their first meeting, they discussed her play *The Massacre*, a tragedy based on the St Bartholomew Massacre of 1572, which contained pointed allusions to the killing of 1,000 royalist prisoners in Paris in September 1792.⁵⁵ When, after the visit, Godwin wrote advising her to withdraw the play from the press, Inchbald replied on 3 November 1792 that she found 'so much tenderness mixed with the justice of [his] criticism' that she was willing to agree.⁵⁶ Again, Godwin regularly assisted Inchbald, who was acutely conscious of her lack of formal education, in preparing her manuscripts for publication. As well as revising her hugely popular comedy *Every One Has His Fault* (1793), he corrected a draft of her second novel, *Nature and Art* (1796), in response to her characteristically direct instructions, given in a letter of 24 January 1794: 'Pray mark bad spelling and grammar, obscurities, tediousness &c &c | and pray don't preach.'⁵⁷ Above all, Godwin encouraged her to persevere with the novel, which took her two years to write. When she sent him a tentative sketch, he provided affirmative feedback:

I perceive in this sketch the same sureness of aim and steadiness of hand, which first told me what you were capable of, in the 'Simple Story'. It seems to me that the drama puts shackles upon you, and that the compression it requires prevents your genius from expanding itself . . . I know not what is to come, but what I have already seen leads me confidently to hope the same mastery in the execution of the remainder of your plan. Do not, I conjure you . . . desert a beginning that promises so much instruction and delight!⁵⁸

When she finished the manuscript, Godwin was again on hand to respond. According to his diary, he read it twice in December 1795, evidently approving it, since the following month Inchbald sold it to Robinson for £150.⁵⁹

Yet the flow of advice between the two writers was by no means one-way. That Godwin learned as much as he taught is suggested by a letter to Inchbald, dated 1 December 1817, in which he recollected 'with some emotion the sort of intercourse that passed between us when Caleb Williams was in his non-age, and in the vigor of his age. Particularly, I have looked a hundred times with great delight at the little marginal notes and annotations with which you adorned the pages of my writings of that period.'⁶⁰ These annotations have not survived, but Inchbald also gave her opinion of *Caleb Williams*, which she read just prior to publication, in several undated letters. After reading the first thirty pages, she wrote excitedly to Godwin, 'Nobody is so pleased when they find anything new as I am. | I found your style different from what I have ever yet met . . . I have to add to your praises,

that of a most minute and yet most concise method of delineating human sensations.⁶¹ Significantly, this first critical reaction was one of recognition as well as discovery: in singling out Godwin's economical depiction of psychological states, Inchbald highlighted what he had learned from her own methods of dramatic revelation of character in *A Simple Story* (1791) – a work he re-read frequently as a source of inspiration for his own.⁶² When she had finished, she gave a more considered verdict: 'Your first volume is far inferior to the two Last. | Your 2^d is sublimely horrible – captivatingly Frightful. | Your 3rd is all a great genius can do to delight a great genius . . . | It is my opinion that fine Ladies, milliners, mantuamakers, and boarding school Girls will Love to tremble over it – and that men of taste and judgement will admire the superior talents, the *incessant* energy of mind you have evinced.'⁶³ As well as correctly predicting the novel's appeal to all classes, Inchbald cautioned Godwin against politically outspoken remarks, 'and these particularly marked for the reader's attention by the purport of your preface'. It is not known whether or not Godwin toned down his political criticisms as a result of this advice, but when the novel appeared on 26 May 1794, the preface was withheld.

This frank, mutually beneficial epistolary interchange adds further depth and context to Godwin's social circles, revealing the extent to which women were regarded as the discursive and professional equals of men: Godwin treated Inchbald no differently from close male friends, such as Thomas Holcroft and William Nicholson, with whom he engaged in regular political and philosophical discussions. In this community of reform-minded individuals, literary composition was not a solitary process, but a shared, even collaborative activity between men and women, supported by a network of literary and social relations. Godwin's letters document a lasting commitment to egalitarian professional relationships between the sexes, helping to explain why he continued to act as a magnet for women intellectuals and social reformers in later life, when he was sought out by Madame de Staël, Frances Wright, and Harriet Martineau, amongst others.

Each separate letter mentioned above is significant for the contribution it makes to our understanding of the minute particulars of Godwin's personal and professional development. Viewed collectively, these person-to-person exchanges create a whole that is greater than and different from the parts. They offer a revaluation of the career of an Enlightenment intellectual for whom, as Ruth Benedict wrote of Wollstonecraft, 'life had no axioms; its geometry was all experimental',⁶⁴ and provide an insider's view of the diverse communities which constituted the radical intelligentsia of his times. As an historical as well as a personal record, they bear witness

to aesthetic, social, and political upheavals across three generations: from the Dutch Patriot Revolution through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars to the largely bloodless reforms of the 1830s. To scrutinize Godwin's letters in their entirety is to engage with different values from those traditionally associated with the Romantic past: sociability as well as solitary contemplation, political savoir-faire as well as political idealism, stoical detachment as well as heartfelt emotion – together with a lifelong commitment to the ideals of the Commonwealth era. Godwin's voice – analytical, forthright, cerebral – provides a new element in the conversation of British Romanticism. His letters, as witnesses to the interior life of a vanguard thinker who borrowed every changing shape to find expression, provide a searching reappraisal of an extended revolutionary era.

NOTES

1. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (eds.), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989).
2. Mark Philp (gen. ed.), *The Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992); Nora Crook with Pamela Clemit (gen. eds.), *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996); Grevel Lindop (gen. ed.), *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–3); Marilyn Butler (gen. ed.), *The Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 12 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999–2003).
3. Stuart Curran (gen. ed.), *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, 14 vols. in progress (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005–).
4. Marilyn Butler, 'Editing Women', *Studies in the Novel* 27 (1995), 281.
5. Marilyn Butler (ed.), *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also Jane Austen, *Emma*, introd. Butler (London: Everyman's Library, 1991); Maria Edgeworth, 'Castle Rackrent' and 'Ennui', ed. Butler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, ed. Butler (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Butler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995); Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley, introd. Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
6. Butler, 'Editing Women', p. 274.
7. Marilyn Butler and Mark Philp, 'Introduction', in Godwin, *Collected Novels*, vol. 1, p. 42.
8. 'Godwin–Shelley Correspondence', in Godwin, *Collected Novels*, vol. 1, pp. 69–82.

9. Kenneth Neill Cameron, Donald H. Reiman, and Doucet Devin Fischer (eds.), *Shelley and His Circle, 1773–1822*, 10 vols. to date (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961–).
10. Stuart Curran, review of Godwin, *Collected Novels, Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5.4 (July 1993), 383.
11. Pamela Clemit (ed.), *The Letters of William Godwin*, 6 vols., to be published by Oxford University Press.
12. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 3. 64–8 (l. 65), in Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (eds.), *The Poems of Shelley*, 3 vols. in progress (London: Longman, 1989–), vol. II, pp. 589–90.
13. Bodleian [Abinger] Dep. b. 228/3. I am grateful to the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, for permission to publish materials from the Abinger papers (hereafter '[Ab.] Dep.').
14. William Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, in Mark Philp (gen. ed.), *The Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 7 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993), vol. III, p. 15.
15. Richard Price, *The Evidence for a Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind* (1787), in D. O. Thomas (ed.), *Richard Price: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 163–4.
16. See esp. John Seed, 'Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s', *Historical Journal* 28.2 (1985), 317, and John Seed, 'A Set of Men Powerful Enough in Many Things': Rational Dissent and Political Opposition in England, 1770–1790', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 158–9.
17. See Pamela Clemit, 'William Godwin and James Watt's Copying Machine: Wet-transfer Copies in the Abinger Papers', *Bodleian Library Record* 18.5 (April 2005), 532–60.
18. [Ab.] Dep. b. 215/5.
19. [Ab.] Dep. c. 523.
20. Cameron et al. (eds.), *Shelley and his Circle*, vol. 1, pp. 26–34.
21. G-145, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.
22. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), x. 372, in Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (eds.), *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 378.
23. [Ab.] Dep. b. 227/2(a).
24. Godwin, *Political Justice*, in Godwin, *Political and Philosophical Writings*, vol. III, pp. 448–9, 456.
25. Godwin to Dyson, date-stamped 26 Sept. [1795], [Ab.] Dep. b. 214/9.
26. Godwin to [Dyson], 21 Mar. 1792, [Ab.] Dep. c. 607/3. The addressee of this letter can now be identified from Godwin's unpublished diary ([Ab.] Dep. e. 199) (hereafter 'GD').
27. Elizabeth Hamilton, *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah; Written Previous to, and During the Period of His Residence in England*, 2 vols. (London:

- G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796), vol. 11, pp. 210–15; Robert Southey to Joseph Cottle, 13 Mar. 1797, in Charles Cuthbert Southey (ed.), *The Life and Correspondence of the Late Robert Southey*, 6 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1849–50), vol. 1, p. 306; George Stillman Hillard (ed.), *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, 2 vols. (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1876), vol. 1, p. 294.
28. Godwin to Anthony Carlisle, 15 Sept. 1797, [Ab.] Dep. b. 215/2.
 29. Godwin to [Amelia Alderson], 23 Oct. 1797, [Ab.] Dep. b. 227/8, fol. 68.
 30. Godwin to Marshal, 11 July 1800, [Ab.] Dep. b. 214/5.
 31. [Ab.] Dep. b. 214/5.
 32. See Pamela Clemit, 'Philosophical Anarchism in the Schoolroom: William Godwin's Juvenile Library, 1805–25', *Bibliion: The Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 9.1/2 (Fall 2000/Spring 2001), 44–70.
 33. Godwin, 'Of Cohabitation', *The Enquirer* (1797), in Philp (ed.), *Philosophical Writings*, vol. v, p. 119.
 34. Godwin to Mary Jane Godwin, date-stamped 21 Aug. 1809, [Ab.] Dep. c. 523.
 35. Godwin, undated note, [Ab.] Dep. b. 227/5. This note can now be identified as 'Notes of Essays', written 18 July 1801 (GD, [Ab.] Dep. e. 205).
 36. Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in Godwin, *Collected Novels*, vol. 1, p. 118; Wollstonecraft to Godwin, [15 Sept. 1796], in Ralph M. Wardle (ed.), *Godwin & Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, and London: Constable, 1967), p. 35.
 37. Godwin to Henry Rosser, 27 Mar. 1820, [Ab.] Dep. c. 532/1.
 38. Godwin to W. Cross, 4 Jan. 1831, [Ab.] Dep. b. 215/2.
 39. Godwin to [Earl Grey], 11 Oct. 1831, [Ab.] Dep. c. 607/1.
 40. Godwin to Lady Caroline Lamb, 25 Feb. 1819, [Ab.] Dep. c. 529.
 41. Godwin to William Godwin, Jun., n.d., [Ab.] Dep. b. 227/3(b).
 42. [Ab.] Dep. c. 524.
 43. Godwin to Shelley, 10 Dec. 1812, [Ab.] Dep. c. 524.
 44. [Ab.] Dep. b. 228/7; cf. Milton, *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd against Prelaty*, in Don M. Wolfe (gen. ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1953–82), vol. 1, p. 810.
 45. Godwin to Ann Godwin, n.d., [Ab.] Dep. c. 526.
 46. See D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 68.
 47. [Ab.] Dep. b. 524; cf. Milton, *Areopagitica: A Speech . . . for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing*, in Wolfe (gen. ed.), *Complete Prose Works*, vol. 11, p. 493.
 48. See correspondence of Godwin with Henry Colburn, Forster 48.E.3, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum.
 49. [Ab.] Dep. c. 227/2(a). This project found limited expression in Godwin's *The History of Rome . . . For the Use of Schools and Young Persons* (1809), published under the pseudonym of 'Edward Baldwin, Esq.'
 50. [Ab.] Dep. b. 227/8, fol. 88. The printed text reads 'blows' (Godwin, *Collected Novels*, vol. 1, p. 89).

51. See Pamela Clemit, 'Mary Shelley and William Godwin, a Literary-Political Partnership, 1823–36', *Women's Writing* 6.3 (1999), 285–95.
52. For a fuller statement of the argument developed in the rest of this essay, see Pamela Clemit, 'Godwin, Women, and "The Collision of Mind with Mind"', *Wordsworth Circle* 35.2 (Spring 2004), 72–6.
53. For a comparison between the historical experience of Roman Catholics and other nonconformists, see John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1975), pp. 391–401.
54. Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780–1805* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 91 n., cites Godwin's note of a conversation with Inchbald on 'marriage' (GD, 16 Sept. 1793, [Ab.] Dep. e. 201) as indicative of a proposal, but this is more likely to refer to criticisms of the institution of marriage in book eight of *Political Justice*.
55. James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald: Including Her Familiar Correspondence with the Most Distinguished Persons of Her Time*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), vol. 1, p. 365 n.
56. [Ab.] Dep. c. 509.
57. [Ab.] Dep. c. 509; Godwin revised 'M^{rs} Inchbald's comedy' from 26 to 28 Nov. 1792 and read 'Inchbald's Romance, ms' from 27 to 30 Jan. 1794 (GD, [Ab.] Dep. e. 200, e. 201).
58. Godwin to Inchbald, [Dec. 1795], in Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald*, vol. II, p. 354.
59. Godwin read 'Inchbald', 331 pages, from 24 to 26 Dec., and again from 27 to 30 Dec. 1795 (GD, [Ab.] Dep. e. 202); see Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald*, vol. II, p. 3.
60. Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald*, vol. II, p. 221.
61. [Ab.] Dep. c. 509.
62. Godwin read *A Simple Story* from 12 to 16 Sept. 1793, whilst writing *Caleb Williams*; from 16 to 27 Sept. 1799, whilst writing *St Leon* (1799); from 19 Oct. to 11 Nov. 1804, whilst writing *Fleetwood*; and from 18 to 20 Aug. 1831, whilst writing *Deloraine* (1833) (GD, [Ab.] Dep. e. 201, e. 204, e. 207, e. 225).
63. [Ab.] Dep. c. 509.
64. Ruth Benedict, 'Mary Wollstonecraft', in Margaret Mead (ed.), *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1959), p. 491.